

# Comparing the experience of Chinese and West African students at a British university: findings from a survey.

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**“You have to be strong, very strong...it is not easy to leave your family and study overseas. You need to be strong in your mind, and you need to be sure that you have come here to study.”**

*Cameroonian undergraduate*

This report presents some of the findings from a survey undertaken over the academic year 2005/6 at the University of Wolverhampton, with the aim of discovering as much as possible, from a range of perspectives, about the experience of international students at the University. To limit the scope of the investigation, the survey focussed on three nationalities/regions: a mature and well-researched market (mainland China), and two emerging and little-researched markets (India and West Africa, i.e. Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon). Because no Indian students were available for interview, this paper gives the findings for Chinese and West African students only.

## **Survey method**

A questionnaire was distributed to students attending the International Orientation in September 2005, with a cash prize draw as an incentive. Of the 159 students who completed the questionnaire,

- 9 were from West Africa (4.0% of total enrolment for 2005/6)
- 8 were from China (4.3% of total enrolment for 2005/6)

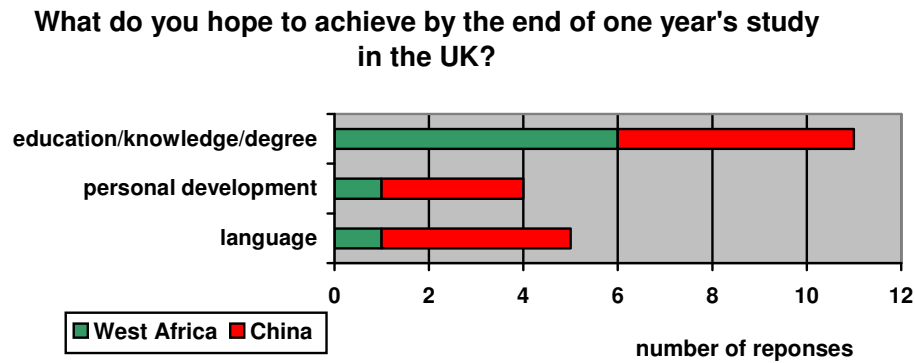
In-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out during the second semester with students from China (2.7% of total enrolment) and West Africa (2.2% of total enrolment).

To triangulate the findings from the questionnaire and student interviews, interviews were conducted with academic staff and representatives of university service departments. A range of data concerning academic performance was supplied by the University's Planning Division.

## Findings

### *Students' aspirations*

Fig. 1



According to students surveyed at Orientation (fig.1), attaining a good education/knowledge base/degree was important for students from both China and West Africa. English language development and experiencing a different culture were of significant importance for students from mainland China.

### *Students' concerns about studying in the UK*

Fig. 2

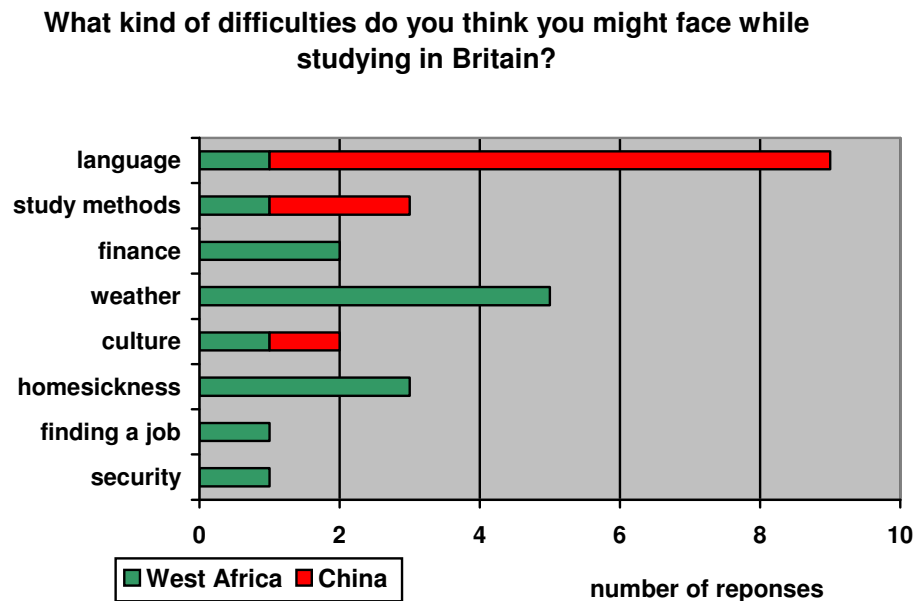


Fig. 2 indicates that for Chinese students, the main difficulty anticipated was language-related, with all eight respondents citing this as their only or major concern. West African students were concerned about the weather

(too cold), and were more likely to anticipate being homesick than students of other nationalities. Two West African students said they did not anticipate any difficulties at all.

### ***Language***

For students for whom English is a foreign language, English is both a motive for studying in the UK, and a potential area of difficulty while here. This can be seen in the Chinese responses to the survey questions shown above.

The three Nigerian interviewees said they had experienced no problems with language apart from the need to adjust initially to the local accent, which had not affected their academic or social life at all. In contrast, two colleagues interviewed said they and their students had problems understanding the accents of some speakers of English as a second language.

The interviewees from China and Cameroon described a variety of linguistic challenges in their academic and social life. Some had problems with academic terminology: they understood the content/concepts but were not familiar with the terms in English and this caused problems understanding lectures, participating in class discussions, reading, and writing assignments. Understanding lectures was also difficult when the lecturer spoke fast, had a non-standard accent, or used a lot of colloquialisms and local references.<sup>1</sup> In class or in group discussions, students wanted to participate but frequently found that by the time they had formulated their point or their question in English, the discussion had moved on to another topic; this sometimes caused their classmates to think they were 'quiet' or 'passive'. Pronunciation was also a problem for some, as classmates had difficulty understanding their accents. Students from both China and Cameroon commented that they had to spend longer on reading than their UK peers.<sup>2</sup>

Socially, UK students' fast speech, local accent and use of slang were difficult for the Chinese and Cameroonian students to understand. They had frequently to ask for repetition or paraphrase and found that, while some UK students were "very very kind", others quickly became impatient. Students were also frustrated by their lack of ability to express their ideas and feelings fluently and spontaneously. This created a barrier to forming friendships with local students.

### ***IT skills***

10% of survey respondents said they would like basic IT training, indicating that a proportion of our international students have had much less exposure to IT than a typical UK school-leaver. This was borne out in interviews with

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<sup>1</sup> See Johns (1996) and Littlemore (2001).

<sup>2</sup> In the words of a former student: "If it takes a British person one hour to read a text, it will take a French speaker two hours and a Chinese speaker four hours."

students from West Africa, who said that IT was little used in HE institutions in their countries, and that large class sizes, frequent power cuts and breakdown of equipment reduced students' access to IT even further. For those who had a home computer or lived near a cyber-café, this was not a great problem; for others, meeting University course requirements (e.g. information searching, wordprocessing assignments) represented something of a challenge. Students from China, on the other hand, claimed to be competent users of all four applications; this is not surprising as Chinese undergraduates are expected to pass national computing certificates to a certain level.

### ***Teaching and learning: differences from home country***

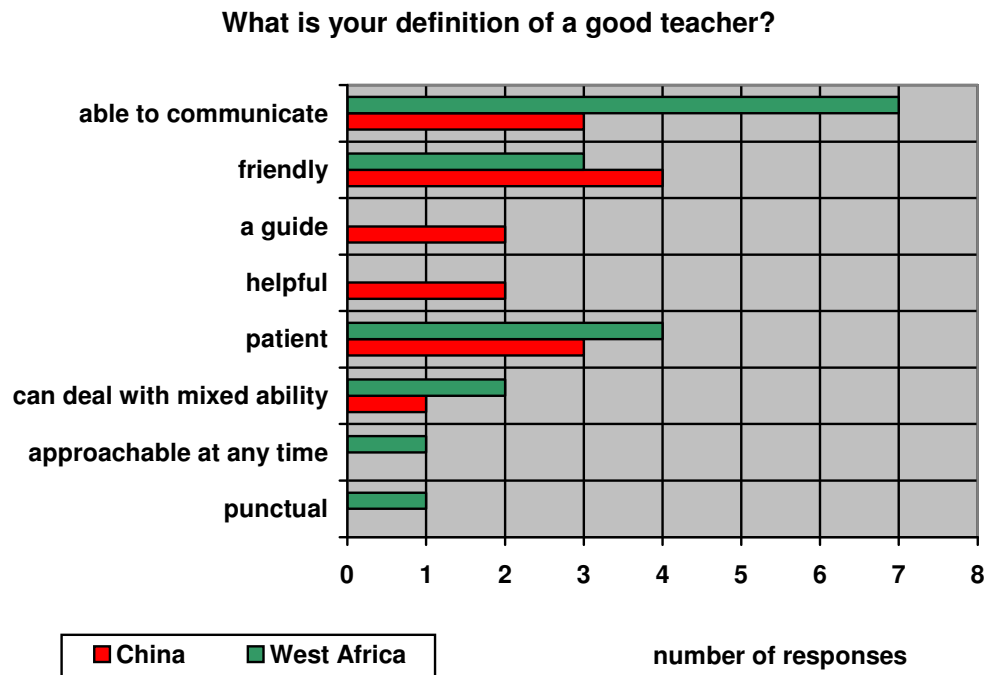
Although several of the students surveyed in September 2005 expected to encounter difficulties in adjusting to UK teaching and learning styles, the ten students interviewed in Feb-June 2006 said they had found these differences a source of pleasure rather than a difficulty to be overcome.

In both China and West Africa, students had more class contact hours (20-30 hpw) and fewer coursework assignments. In their home countries, students had to study more subjects, possibly in less depth. Reading was normally restricted to one textbook per module; in some cases "the lecturer gave **everything** to the students. We sometimes didn't even have to buy books." With one exception (Nigerian postgraduate), students described their previous learning as primarily reproductive, with students demonstrating via exams that they had mastered the knowledge imparted by the teacher.

Most students said they appreciated the emphasis on independent learning in the UK. "In the UK, students are asked to develop *themselves* - to gain knowledge through doing homework and assignments - this helps them to develop their research ability" (Nigeria). One student felt that the UK study environment was more 'relaxed', allowing him time to reflect on what he was learning. At the same time, the UK system could cause initial difficulties for students who were used to a structured timetable and guidance from teachers: "In the UK you're left to study on your own. You need to be more proactive and plan ahead." Occasionally the apparently more 'relaxed' pace of study caused international students to underestimate the demands of their course, leading to panic at assessment time.

One of the most significant differences in teaching and learning styles encountered by our interviewees was their relationships with academic staff. To some extent, their expectations and impressions of UK staff were coloured by previous learning experience in their home countries.

Fig. 3



Students were asked at International Orientation to give their definition of a good teacher. The results (Fig. 3) suggest that the West African students seemed to demand less in terms of personal guidance and support than the Chinese respondents did. Interestingly, neither Chinese nor West African students named 'good knowledge of subject' as a criterion.

At interview, most of the West African students said they felt UK lecturers were more approachable, and treated them more as equals, than lecturers in their home countries; one student said he appreciated the fact that teachers in the UK were willing to admit when they didn't know the answer to a student's question. Two West African students commented that UK lecturers "don't like it when students fail" and did what they could to help students succeed. Other West African students said they enjoyed teaching with a 'hands-on' approach: "it 'sticks' because it has immediate practical application."

The Chinese interviewees, in contrast, were disappointed with the support they received from academic staff in the UK: in general, staff were less approachable than in China and "always in a hurry". Three named as their favourite teacher someone who had helped them solve non-teaching-related problems. One of the colleagues named commented ruefully on this at interview: "Chinese students want to be mothered...they want to identify with *one* member of staff, to whom they go for help with everything."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>See Bailey (2005) for a more detailed discussion of what Chinese students expect of their teachers.

However, support was not the only quality appreciated by the interviewees. Three said they had been inspired and challenged by their teachers:

“She leads me to think in a different and creative way.”  
(Chinese)

“He’s a hero...he makes me understand that you can always achieve what you want if you think in the right way.” (West African)

### ***The curriculum***

Concern has arisen in recent years over the relevance of UK HE curricula to international students, and over whether these curricula prepare home students to take their place in a global workforce. Some studies show that international students may feel what they are being taught is not applicable to the situation in their home country.<sup>4</sup> International students also report feeling marginalized in class and that their insights and contributions are not welcomed by UK staff, who show little interest in their country and culture. Additionally, exclusive use of local (UK) references, examples and case studies in class can hinder international students from understanding the lecture/discussion. These points are all key to internationalisation strategies being implemented in HEIs across the country.<sup>5</sup>

At interview, all ten students said what they were learning in Wolverhampton would be useful in their future career. Three said they were acquiring useful skills:

“Learning Sociology is a way to explore my mind, to think uniquely, to look into social life independently.”

“The things I learn in my country just from books, they teach me here physically.”

“The course is a good foundation for setting up my own business. I have been doing market research and have detailed business plans arising from my business modules.”

Two mentioned the relevance of their course content and two said that the improvement in their English level would enhance their career prospects.

One Chinese student said he sometimes had difficulty following lectures due to lecturers’ use of local examples. Two West African students said they were sometimes excluded from in-class discussions by their lack of knowledge of the UK work environment. (In both cases a high proportion of

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Maundeni (2001); Peters (2005)

<sup>5</sup> Koutsantoni (2006)

their classmates were part-time mature students with professional experience.)

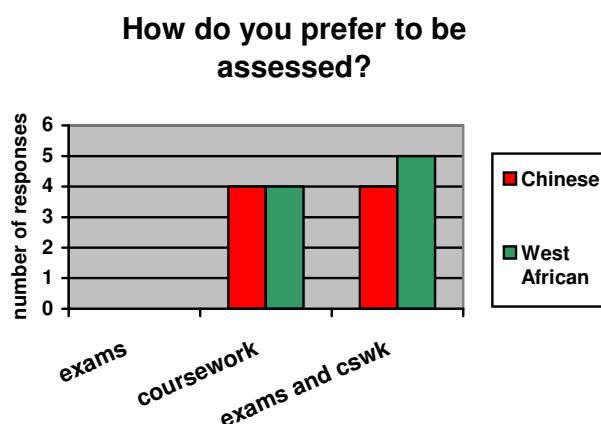
All three Nigerian students felt strongly that relevant work experience should be built into the curriculum. One said his UK degree would be worth less in the Nigeria job market without relevant work experience. The others commented on the need to observe in practice what they were learning in theory.

In general, interviewees felt that some staff but few students were interested in their country and culture. The exception was one West African student, who found, while undertaking market research as part of his course, that British staff and students were very interested in African culture and products. One Chinese student said: "I feel that the majority of our tutors have some kind of prejudice...a bad feeling towards Chinese." Another said, "Most staff and students here don't show much interest in China. They expect Chinese students to adapt to Britain", but thought that this was only to be expected and not significant cause for concern.

### ***Assessment and academic performance***

At International Orientation, students were asked how they preferred to be assessed. Chinese and West African students were divided in preference between coursework, and a mixture of exams and coursework. Most interviewees said that exams outweighed coursework in their home countries, with exams counting for 80% or more of their final grade.

Fig. 4



Almost no studies have been published in the UK concerning academic performance of international students compared with their UK peers.<sup>6</sup> However, the HEIST and UKCOSA surveys of 1994 and 2004 indicate that academic achievement is a matter of great concern to overseas (non-EU) students, for whom failure carries a greater price than for their

<sup>6</sup> Pelletier (2003:22). The only exception I could find is Makepeace and Baxter (1990).

UK/European peers. The results of our survey questionnaire confirm that, for students from China and West Africa, attaining “an excellent degree” or “good grades” is their most important goal in the UK.

Four of the interviewees were dissatisfied with their first semester grades in the UK. One West African student was dismayed to find his UK grades much lower than in his home country - Cs in his semester 1 modules compared with Distinction in his HND.<sup>7</sup>

An analysis of module results for the academic years 2002/3 to 2004/5 shows that, while there was little difference in achievement at the top end of the scale (i.e. high As), Wolverhampton undergraduates from China and West Africa achieved fewer Bs and more Cs/Ds than their UK peers. The same was true for non-EU undergraduates in general. The postgraduate results for 2002-5 show that non-EU students attained fewer As and Bs and received more Ds than their UK peers in all three years. However, Chinese and West African postgraduates performed as well as their UK peers (i.e. better than other non-EU postgraduates) in 2002/3 and 2003/4.<sup>8</sup>

Staff commented that international students needed time to adjust to UK assessment methods: they tended to use assessment strategies that had been successful in their home country but were not appropriate in the UK context. Students had particular difficulty in understanding assignments involving reflective practice, and tended to underperform in exams due to the pressure of writing at speed in a foreign language. Misunderstanding of assessment requirements led to a higher incidence of academic misconduct among international students.

### ***Academic misconduct***

The charts below depict a breakdown of academic misconduct cases handled by the Conduct and Appeals Unit in the academic year 2004/5. Of the 328 cases handled in total, 199 involved UK-domiciled students and 129 involved non-UK students. The proportion of international students charged with academic misconduct is therefore substantially higher than that of UK-domiciled students (see Fig. 5), particularly so in the national groups targeted by this survey.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>In many countries, university grades are set much higher than in the UK (Ryan 2000:44).

<sup>8</sup>In 2004/5, the grade distribution for Chinese and West African postgraduates remained the same; however there was a marked improvement in UK postgraduate grades for that year.

<sup>9</sup>There were no cases of academic misconduct among the nine Cameroonian students at the University in 2004/5, so the West African figures represent Ghana and Nigeria only.



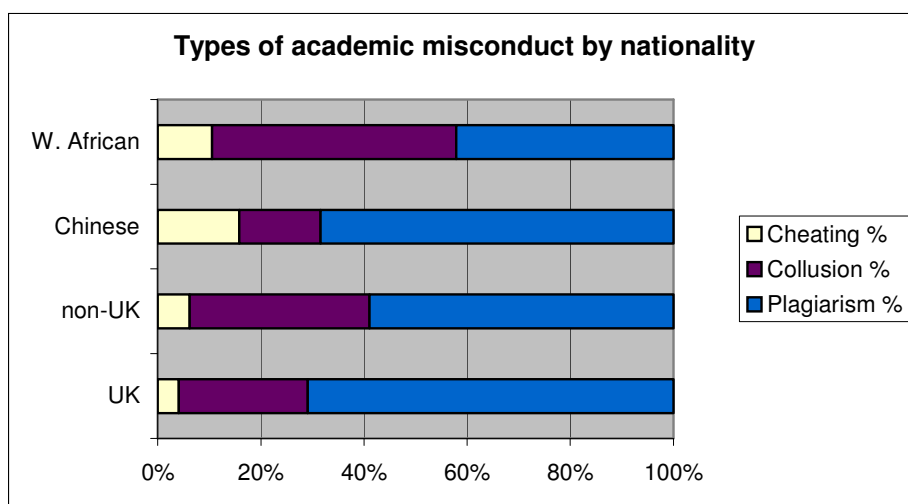
Fig. 5

**Cases dealt with by Conduct and Appeals Unit in 2004/5**

	UK	non-UK	Chinese	W. African
Total number of students	21539	3659	451	315
number of AM cases	199	129	19	27
%	0.9	3.5	4.2	8.6

Source data: Conduct and Appeals Unit, August 2006

Fig. 6



Source data: Conduct and Appeals Unit, August 2006

Fig. 6 shows the types of academic misconduct committed by different national groups. A higher proportion of international than home students were caught cheating in exams (with an above average incidence among Chinese and West African students). Collusion was also more common among international students, in particular those from West Africa. Plagiarism was more common among UK students than international students, with the exception of those from mainland China, who plagiarised almost to the same extent as home students did.

An analysis of the defences given by students at their academic misconduct hearings shows that, in common with UK students, West African defendants tended to plead personal/health problems as an excuse, while Chinese students were more likely to plead language problems. 19% of West African students (compared with 0% Chinese) said they were 'working together' or 'helping a friend': this reflects the higher incidence of collusion among West African students. Chinese students were more likely (47%) than West African students (15%) to say they had misunderstood the regulations.

Because numbers are small for individual nationalities, not too much should be inferred from these figures. Moreover, it would be unwise to conclude that international students are more likely than home students to commit academic misconduct. Four colleagues interviewed said that they felt plagiarism was equally a problem for home and international students, but that international students were more easily detected for linguistic reasons. If this is true, then the issue of international students and Academic Misconduct has an Equal Opportunities dimension (Errey 2002).

### ***Difficulties with study***

Apart from difficulties described under the *Language* and *IT* sections above, interviewees had not experienced serious problems with their study in the UK; on the contrary, one student described how she gave informal coaching to her peers. It could be that students were unwilling to portray themselves in a negative light in the context of the interview; it is also probable that interviewees were self-selecting, i.e. students who were struggling would be less likely to want to participate in the survey. All staff interviewed felt that international students had distinct issues, for example with extensive reading and critical/analytical writing. However, the generally positive experience of our interviewees and their professed ability to cope (due to their personal courage, adaptability and support from the University and friends) should serve as a warning against over-problematizing the international student experience.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Finance***

UK tuition fees represent a significant investment for students from developing countries, and may be raised from the life savings of the student's parents, extended family or (in some cases) local community. According to our interviewees,

- £1 = 1050 Cameroonian francs. This would buy a "very very good hot meal", or allow someone to eat out for two days. The amount of money a student could make by working 40 hpw in their holidays is equal to the salary of a government minister in Cameroon.
- £1 = 256 Naira and would feed a person for a whole day or more in Nigeria, if eating out. The standard minimum wage - e.g. for skilled labourers on a building site - is 900 Naira per day. One student commented that the amount which would sustain him for one month in the UK is more than a whole family would use over the same period in Nigeria.
- £1 = 15 Chinese yuan and would (in the author's experience) pay for three substantial meals a day IF eating on campus in mainland China. According to Wang (2006), the average salary for state sector workers is now 20,000 RMB: i.e. £1,333.33.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Stephens (1997); Ryan (2000:17); UNITE (2006:11)

<sup>11</sup> Exchange rate on 28 August 2006.

While only three of our interviewees said the international student tuition fee was “too high”, all interviewees resented the fact that they had to pay more than home and EU students. Nine of the interviewees had no idea why international student fees are higher than those for home students, and felt in consequence that they were being exploited by the University.

Three interviewees found the cost of living in Wolverhampton cheaper than they had expected, and four (3 Chinese, 1 Nigerian) said it was more expensive. Students managed their expenses and the burden on their families by living frugally and taking part-time work. All interviewees were sponsored by their near relatives; one mature postgraduate was also drawing on her savings.

The huge cost of UK study in real terms is reflected in West African students’ advice to future applicants:

“Save as much money as you can, to pay your tuition fee. Many brilliant students who come here can’t do their best academically because of financial pressure.”

“Prepare to suffer. Don’t come here with the aim of earning money - you need to get a good degree; if you don’t get a good degree, how will you find a good job afterwards?”

Students’ advice to the University reflects not only their financial pressures but also their lack of understanding of the actual cost of Higher Education:

“The tuition fee is too high. The University should be more socialist and charge less. It’s unfair that international student fees are so much higher than those of home students.”

In comparison with the West African interviewees, the Chinese were far less concerned with financial matters. Although they found England expensive, and lived frugally to compensate for this, two out of five said they would not consider taking a part-time job to supplement their income.

### ***Employment***

Given the financial pressures on students of all nationalities, it is hardly surprising that the majority of those surveyed in September 2005 were planning to seek part-time work, although the charts below show that finance was not the only motivating factor for this.<sup>12</sup> Our interviewees who had taken part-time jobs said these helped them to improve their English, interact with local people, and better understand British culture.

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<sup>12</sup> The most commonly cited reason under ‘other’ was ‘experience’ or ‘work experience’

Fig. 8



According to the UKCOSA survey of 2004 and the International Student Barometer findings of 2005, international students across the UK are dissatisfied with the careers advice they receive from their institutions and with the work opportunities that are open to them. The ISB found this to be the area of lowest satisfaction with the UK study experience, and UKCOSA has highlighted the issue as one of its main campaign focuses in recent years and for the immediate future.<sup>13</sup>

Our interviewees were in general happy with the service provided by the University's Careers and Employment Services. They regretted that not all the jobs advertised were open to international students, and said they would welcome advice more specifically tailored to international student needs, in particular how to find UK employment after graduation, and how to get an NI number.

Interviewees were very frustrated by the difficulty of finding work experience relevant to their academic discipline and career aims. The West African students in particular said that, before coming to the UK, they had been led to believe it would be much easier to find work than was in fact the case. Nevertheless, all our interviewees who sought part-time work were successful in finding jobs, although the hours, remuneration and status were lower than they had expected.

### ***Leisure, social integration, and students' perceptions of the UK***

It emerged at interview that in their home countries our survey participants all had busy, active lives and a range of leisure pursuits; in most cases these were markedly curtailed in England, due to pressures of study, financial

<sup>13</sup> UKCOSA (2006:3-5)

constraints, and lack of availability of their preferred leisure pursuit.<sup>14</sup> Typical activities in the UK included walking or jogging, surfing the Net/keeping in touch with home by email, chatting and cooking with friends. Four of the Chinese students did sports (swimming, football, badminton, basketball), mainly with Chinese friends. All of the West African students attended church - some occasionally, some regularly; one was also attending weekly confirmation classes. Although the Chinese students seemed to be under less financial pressure, they had more difficulties with language than the West African students; and felt that the need to adjust to different teaching and learning methods required them to spend more time on study than their UK peers. One Chinese student said that having to cook, do housework and look after her personal affairs meant she had less leisure time than at home. The West African interviewees were very committed to their study, and also felt morally obliged to reduce their sponsors' financial burden by undertaking part-time work: this reduced the time and money available for leisure. One described how, in his home country, he had been President of a humanitarian youth organisation which won local awards for their lobbying and fund-raising activities. He wanted to join a similar organisation in Wolverhampton but could find nothing available locally.

When asked about their friends, the Chinese interviewees said their closest friends and 50-90% of their other friends were Chinese. They attributed this to language difficulties, cultural and lifestyle factors, lack of interest from British students, geography ("Most British students live off campus"), and the fact that "Chinese students like being in a group." For two students, this was a problem:

"I don't want to spend too much time with my Chinese friends - I'm here to study English language and culture."

"I wish I could spend more time with British people...I seldom go somewhere with my British classmates...I have a feeling that I can't truly step into their social circle, join in their life...a big reason is the communication problem."

The West African students agreed that socialising with British students was not always easy: "They are very nice to you, but they don't want to get too close...they are very careful." All students mentioned support and information they had received from the unofficial West African student network, and one said he regularly attended the Nigerian Society; however they also had many friends of other nationalities, including British. All said they enjoyed making friends of different nationalities, and appreciated the ethnic diversity of Wolverhampton. It can be assumed that the West African students were also making friends in the local community through their regular church attendance, and through their part-time jobs.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Chinese students, for example, typically lament the relative absence of late-night shopping, karaoke booths and open-air basketball courts in the UK.

<sup>15</sup> Although many Chinese students also take part-time jobs, these are more likely to be in Chinese restaurants: contact with the local community is therefore limited.

The findings from this survey, although small-scale, agree with national studies which show that international students associate mainly with other international students, find it difficult to build close relationships with British students, and that Chinese students in particular are likely to spend most of their time with co-nationals.<sup>16</sup> The Nigerian students appeared to be the most integrated socially; this bears out national findings that speakers of English as a second language are more likely to make British friends than speakers of English as a foreign language.<sup>17</sup>

Interviewees were asked what they thought of British people and whether they felt welcome as international students in the UK. Most of them felt that British students drank too much, were less serious about their study and frittered away their time and money in pubs, clubs and parties.<sup>18</sup> This was a barrier to integration for both Chinese and West African students, who had limited time and money; for the EFL speakers, the pub/club environment was doubly unattractive because noise levels made it harder to communicate. In terms of the wider community, most students felt that the local people they met in shops, banks etc. were kind, helpful and welcoming. The West African interviewees found some aspects of UK society alienating: British systems were too rigid/slow; customer service in banks and medical surgeries was poor; the pace of life was faster; one couldn't drop in on friends without an invitation or appointment. One Nigerian interviewee commented that, "You can live next door to a UK person for one year and not know their name."

None of our interviewees had experienced racism in the community; this may in part reflect the ethnic diversity of Wolverhampton. One Nigerian student was concerned that the UK media portrayed Africa as very poor - he said that while this was true, it was not the full picture, and could have a negative effect on the way British people perceived African students. Similar complaints have been made by Chinese students and visiting lecturers over the years.

### ***Students' overall satisfaction***

Despite the high cost of tuition, all but one of our interviewees felt they were receiving value for money in terms of their education in the UK. The course content was useful; so too (for EFL-speakers) was their increased competence in English, and the qualification obtained would widen their career prospects. Students who had left home for the first time said they were becoming emotionally stronger and more independent. They were

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<sup>16</sup> Allen and Higgins (1994); Eller et al (2004); UKCOSA (2004)

<sup>17</sup> According to the UKCOSA survey of 2004, two-thirds of native English speakers had UK friends, compared to 36% of speakers of English as a second language, and 29% of EFL speakers.

<sup>18</sup> cf. UKCOSA (2004), UNITE (2006).

learning things about themselves and about society that they might not have learned in their home countries.

Although these findings are encouraging, they are not conclusive. The students interviewed had not yet received their semester 2 results; we do not know whether they are still satisfied after completing their first year of study, and we do not know how they will feel about the value of their UK experience in two years' time - will they recommend it to their colleagues/employees/children? While UK HE providers are required to report to HESA UK and EU student destinations six months after graduation, there is currently no requirement to report on non-EU graduates. Can we therefore be sure that the education we provide to our international students is truly relevant and beneficial to them, after they leave the UK?

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